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## McCollum carving out niche on African AIDS crisis

May 8, 2004



*The trips by Betty McCollum, a St. Paul Democrat, were the most high-profile privately funded travel of any Minnesota House member, travel records reviewed by The Associated Press found. (MPR file photo)*

Washington, DC — (AP) [Rep. Betty McCollum](#) has traveled twice to Africa in the past year, government records show, working on AIDS issues and elevating her stature in Congress in the process.

The trips by McCollum, a St. Paul Democrat, were the most high-profile privately funded travel of any Minnesota House member, travel records reviewed by The Associated Press found.

Overall, seven of the eight members of the House delegation took 21 trips over the past year paid for by outside groups, totaling around \$57,000. The only exception was Rep. Martin Sabo, D-Minneapolis, although he has accepted trips in the past.

Many of the trips were conferences in scenic spots, including Heidelberg, Germany and Jackson Hole, Wyo. Ten of the winter trips involved representatives going somewhere warm, including Florida, California and oceanside Punta Mita, Mexico.

McCollum went to South Africa last August, on an \$8,029 trip sponsored by the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, which works to fight pediatric HIV/AIDS and other diseases affecting children.

McCollum called the fight against AIDS "a wonderful opportunity for the United States to be seen as a nation that nurtures people."

Mark Isaac, the foundation's vice president, called McCollum a leader in the effort to combat AIDS worldwide, saying she has helped pass crucial funding in



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Congress.

Last year, McCollum won passage of an amendment requiring that at least 10 percent (\$240 million) of U.S. funding to fight AIDS internationally be spent on orphan and vulnerable children.

In January of this year, she traveled to Ethiopia, at cost of \$7,009, on a trip sponsored by the Paris-based Parliamentary Network on the World Bank. The network, a collection of legislators from around the world that acts as a watchdog on World Bank projects, recently named McCollum co-chairwoman of its HIV/AIDS Task Force.

David Schultz, a political science professor at Hamline University in St. Paul, said the Africa trips will benefit McCollum by elevating her stature.

"Clearly, Nancy Pelosi has pegged Betty McCollum as one of the rising stars of the party," Schultz said, referring to the House Democratic Leader. Pelosi, D-Calif., put McCollum on the Democratic Steering Committee, which hands out committee assignments among House Democrats.

"One of the areas you get more political panache, more publicity, is when you get involved in high-profile issues," Schultz said. "AIDS fits in very well with both Betty McCollum's concerns and raising her profile. This is a good direction for her to go."

But McCollum, a member of the House International Relations Committee, bristled at the suggestion that she was trying to become a player on the issue.

"I'm hoping to work to eliminate it, not carve out a niche!" said McCollum, one of four Democrats on the Committee's Africa subcommittee. "But if I can be seen as an expert in being able to help people on this issue, then yes."

Another House member who traveled on someone else's money in the past year was Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Detroit Lakes. Peterson took a trip with his son to Pollock, S.D., last October, at a total cost of just over \$6,000, sponsored by the Dairy Farmers of America, a Kansas City-based marketing cooperative.

Included in that trip was nearly \$2,000 in guides and license fees for Peterson and his son to go hunting in the Dakotas.

"Some people go to golf deals," said Peterson. "DFA does a hunting thing, to discuss dairy policy and farm policy. Most (groups) go to fancy resorts; they go to Pollock."

Asked if groups like the Dairy Farmers of America are seeking to buy influence with trips such as these, Peterson responded, "It works both ways. I learn a lot going to trips like this about the industry. I've gotten to be considered an expert on dairy policy. One way is by talking with them."

But Larry Noble, executive director of the watchdog group Center for Responsive Politics, rejected that explanation.

"If you want to become versed in policy, you can do that in meetings," Noble said. "You don't need to go on a hunting trip to learn about dairy policy."

"The fiction is this is all about educating the member of Congress. The reality is

it's all about getting in good favor with the member of Congress."




Rep. Gil Gutknecht, a Republican from Rochester, traveled to Germany twice last year, although one of the trips was a combination of an official and private trip. He flew to Europe on a taxpayer-funded flight to visit U.S. troops in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo and Germany, and while there, accepted \$850 worth of food and lodging to speak to the German Chamber of Commerce.

Gutknecht's spokesman, Bryan Anderson, said the congressman had legitimate business in going to Germany.






"He is the chairman of Congressional Study Group on Germany," Anderson said. "With his interest in prescription drug prices, it fits in with his work."

Gutknecht is one of the leading congressional advocates for allowing Americans to import drugs from other countries, often citing lower prices found in nations such as Germany.Z

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